

Editorial: An appropriate show of police force

September 2, 2008

Minnesotans are used to seeing reasonably well-behaved hockey fans and large Irish families marching through downtown St. Paul. So it was more than a little jarring when police in riot gear hit the streets Monday afternoon.

"This can't be happening in Minnesota!" one onlooker said as an editorial writer passed by. Thankfully, it was.

The show of force was a reasonable response to the behavior and the threat posed by a relatively small number of rogue protesters who traveled to the Twin Cities for no other reason than to damage property, abuse the police and disrupt the business of the Republican National Convention.

It's worth scrolling through the list of Monday bookings from the Ramsey County jail now posted on the Star Tribune's online InfoCenter (startribune.com/infocenter). Many of those arrested in St. Paul weren't carrying IDs or wouldn't give their names. Those who were identified came from Lexington, Ky.; Brooklyn, N.Y.; Portland, Ore., and dozens of other U.S. cities. These weren't the sons and daughters of Highland Park and south Minneapolis.

Local authorities were prepared to handle the tens of thousands of peaceful protesters expected for Monday's "March on the RNC." After a yearlong investigation that included undercover work, they also were well aware that up to 500 self-described anarchists planned to be here throughout the convention.

The anarchists didn't come to object to the war in Iraq, offshore drilling or trade policies. They came to raise hell, which they did by breaking storefront windows, blocking streets, throwing objects from bridges and attacking police and delegates. It could have been worse. In earlier raids authorities confiscated weapons, Google maps and detailed organizational plans.

St. Paul Mayor Chris Coleman said Tuesday that the word on the street at the Democratic National Convention in Denver was that the anarchists were saving themselves for the Republicans and St. Paul. It definitely looked that way around noon Monday, when a group of about 100 protesters dressed in black and wearing bandanas over their faces headed downtown apart from the main march. That kicked off a daylong ordeal for law enforcement officials that ended with almost 300 arrests and a distorted national portrayal of the city, its police and the larger protest march.

Early Monday evening Fox News made it sound as if St. Paul might soon be overwhelmed by the "antiwar protest." That portion of the protest was just fine, with about 10,000 people peacefully marching from the Capitol along a designated route to a spot near Xcel. There were strollers and grandmothers, suburban couples and Jerry Garcia lookalikes. It could have passed for a typical Saturday at the Uptown Art Fair. The anarchists didn't succeed in significantly disrupting the convention, nor did they do extensive damage to the city. Several journalists were mistakenly arrested Monday, but those kinds of mistakes were the exception.

Thanks to the extensive planning of Coleman, Police Chief John Harrington, Ramsey County Sheriff Bob Fletcher and other law enforcement officials, public safety have won out, so far, over anarchism in the streets. The strong show of force was necessary crime prevention that kept the streets safer than the anarchists would have liked.

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